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Schools must refuse to contribute to this age of "information overload" and, through an interdisciplinary approach, assist students to become receptive to humane feelings and to understand the complexities of a culture. To these ends, educators must "re-program" the entire educational system by relinquishing their attachment to their own disciplines; by uniting the subject matter of English, social studies, art, and science; and by eliminating the 30-desk classroom in favor of large group, seminar, and tutorial arrangements. Once the system is reorganized, whole environments (historical as well as modern) can be examined, the shaping power of media and technology can be probed, and the fragmented, rapid-paced school day can become more leisurely. (JS)

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NEW CIRCUITS OR SHORT CIRCUITS ?

By their nature, English and Social Studies cannot be packaged and programized. They are open-ended and (to coin a barbarism) open-beginninged. This characteristic results in an "ecological curriculum."

by Frank McLaughlin

During the past decade we have witnessed a renaissance in curriculum. New approaches in biology and chemistry are being tried; the new math is enthusiastically debated—and misunderstood. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, English teachers wait patiently for the linguists to stop arguing, hoping perhaps that a new English might be conjured up. In spite of the clouds of dust being stirred, however, it might be more realistic to expect a *Deux ex machina* resolution than a linguist-promoted one.

Although it offers little solace, the fact is that the English curriculum has always been unmanageable. In his essay, "The Emerging English Curriculum," J.N. Hook notes that thirty years ago

> a professor made a list of all the aims of English teaching that he could find anywhere in print. He discovered a total of 1,481 . . . (*Revolution in Teaching*, p. 245)

Recently there have been a number of attempts to define what the English teacher is supposed to teach. For the moment the consensus seems to be the traditional trinity: Language, Literature, and Composition. Sounds neat and tidy? Actually, it only narrows the problem a trifle since each of these terms can encompass galaxies of possible topics and materials.

To the English teacher whose security is being threatened because of the advances in other disciplines, let me offer a thimbleful of reassurance before plunging into the middle of a greater muddle. If we observe the subject fields where the main curricular gains have been made, it is apparent that change has occurred in those areas where knowledge can be packaged or programed—the strict sciences. Given the closed systems

This article is adapted from the opening address given to the New Jersey Association of English Teachers in a conference on the mass media, September 1967.

of science, it is likely that a reasonable, orderly (i.e., linear), pattern of instruction can be devised. Not so in English or social studies, however, because these disciplines are open-ended and (to coin a barbarism) open-beginninged. But this is precisely why these subjects lie at the heart of the humanities.

While attempting to improve a child's facility with oral and written language, we expose him to a wide variety of vicarious experiences. These experiences are meant to liberate him from the narrow confines of his own experience. What frightens me about the current situation is that English teachers seem to be losing ability to really "touch" their students. It is my contention that a major portion of the hostility, frustration and the inattention of so many high school and college students are instinctive reactions to forces they know are gutting them. I contend that these forces are the schools themselves and the mass media.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Marshall McLuhan has aptly labeled this an age of information overload. We are inundated with messages beamed over, around, and through us from billboards, newspapers, transistors, TV, third class mail, movies, magazines and books. The generation growing up in this information-polluted environment should at least be entitled to ear plugs and a map. This never quiet marketplace wasn't created by the youngster, unfortunately, and helping him sanely inhabit it is the task of the educator. For decades now schools rather than provide filtration and understanding have merely contributed to the general din.

The teacher who persists in looking upon instruction as packing more information into kids, isn't simply misguided; rather, he is adding to the cacophony, damaging those he is trying to help. This is why the "survey" method of teaching literature, for instance, is positively self-defeating. Such a method is defended on grounds that awareness of our cultural heritage must be inculcated. Such an intention is perverted by the bulk of works a student is forced to contend with. The situation is analogous to the circumstances of quality TV programs. Such fare is more common than many people are willing to admit, but it is largely diluted by what is around it.

Study guides are another example of the compression mania. They are products of the enervating processes we run students through. We might look upon them as "halfway houses" that help students stay afloat amid the oceans of materials we make them swim in. These creations, which reduce *Hamlet, The Waste Land,* and *Moby Dick* alike to the same deadly hash, serve as monuments to the futile methods we've employed in dealing with the knowledge explosion. If you want to pursue what the "digest" psychology has done on a grander and more frightening scale, read Daniel Boorstin's *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America.* Boorstin's thesis is that we have befogged ourselves in a "thicket of unreality" primarily by misusing technology and worshipping at the shrine of progress. He too gives instances of the detrimental shaping power of a medium. In Chapter I, for example, he documents the common practice of reporters "manufacturing" news in order to create attractive copy for afternoon editions.

THE NEW BARBARIANS

Marshall McLuhan has told us that today's students must work harder than any children in history to make sense of their environment. Working harder, unfortunately, is no guarantee of understanding more. Formal education in this country is geared to gagging on many experiences instead of clarifying with fewer more qualitative ones. Harvey Firari, a *Media and Methods* contributor, observes that kids are living in the "shallows of high fidelity" today rather than "mythically and in-depth" as McLuhan suggests. The skimming process most students adopt to assimilate material until test time demonstrates this. It is doubtful that they employ more durable approaches outside of school.

Technology has amplified man's power and range. It has shaped all of us without our being conscious of it. One facet of tech-

nology's hypnotizing power was exposed by a Spanish educator forty years ago. Jose Ortega y Gasset suggested that those born into highly developed societies tended to accept the sophisticated products of their society as natural phenomena, as normal parts of their environment. Applying this to the present time, we come up with a situation in which jet planes, TV, communications satellites and laser beams are as primal as trees, rocks, and swamps. An unreflective acceptance literally renders the inhabitants of such a culture primitives in Edens of high technology.

Assisting students in escaping from the provincialism of their own culture is a major task of education. The high level of technology must be understood as the product of civilization. Today's teenager must become both mediate and the possessor of a long memory. How do we do this? Not by annual pilgrimages to the shrines of Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare, but through interdisciplinary exploration of environments and media. We must put together a team of English, Social Studies, Art, and Science teachers, and explore the history, structure, function, and social effects of such a medium as television. Such a team attack would go far beyond the unsure skirmishes that now take place in English classrooms. It might also insure that future generations might be the first in history to exploit media for human betterment.

Information is irrelevant until it is put into some meaningful context. Alfred North Whitehead worked at this forty years ago in the opening page of *The Aims of Education:*

> Culture is activity of thought and receptiveness to beauty and humane feelings. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth. What we should aim at producing is men who possess both culture and expert knowledge in some special direction. Their expert knowledge will give them the ground to start from, and their culture will lead them as deep as philosophy and as high as art.

Does this make less sense in 1967? Why are we so obsessed with staying on top of the news? This Sisyphian obsession with keeping up, with doing things faster and better has contributed to making schools information mazes that children run before joining the GREAT RAT RACE.

Two recent phenomena that reflect the speed-up and compression neurosis are the speed-reading craze and the proliferation of study guides. Speed reading neatly illustrates the men-create-tools-and-then-are-shaped-by-them syndrome. Man creates the movie camera, a powerful and sophisticated extension of this eye, then applies its scanning technique to the old technology of print. Speed reading is an attempt to *gestalt* entire pages. What bothers me about this is not the new technique, but what prompted it—the false assumption that assimilating information faster is somehow the same as education. Let's not mistake being "with it" with being wise.

What I am suggesting goes beyond the capabilities of the present classroom situation. We must give up another long cherished security blanket—the slavish attachment to our discipline. McLuhan has long acknowledged the need for a complete re-programing of our education system. He has noted that

> all the talk about instructional aids in the classroom from electronic means is nonsense. You cannot introduce electronic forms into the classroom without rescheduling the whole process of instruction, and this is impossible under our unwieldly, fragmented conditions of classroom use. ("From Instruction to Discovery," *Media and Methods,* October, 1966)

English teachers have long been haunted by the specter of the mass media. Yet, all attempts at media study prove unsatisfactory. This certainly is not due to any lack of sincerity or effort, but to the obvious confining influence of the linear structures they work from. It has been impossible to thoroughly study media such as TV, motion pictures, and magazines in the English class because there are economic, scientific, and political forces to be dealt with and these lie outside the English teacher's expertise.

Once teachers reorganize into interdisciplinary teams the mass media will lose its amorphous white whale quality. Whole environments can be probed, and the shaping powers of technology will be laid bare. The environment outside school will be constantly scrutinized and sifted and will serve

as referent when explorations into past or foreign environments are undertaken. Would it be difficult to assemble a team to compare the Elizabethan environment with our own? This type of project would require considerable planning and ingenuity, but it would be a far cry from the piddling Globe Theater Slide Tour that so many of us have taken in trying to give students a sense of Shakespeare's time. Such cross-fertilization would inspire not only a thorough sense of Elizabethan living, but, I wager, it would lead teenagers to make discoveries about their own situations. Each succeeding venture—5th Century Greece, 19th Century Russia, or even the World Community of the 21st Century—would be enhanced by past environmental explorations. It would also be possible to probe urban ghettos, suburbia, Polynesia and various African cultures. Each environment would be a mosaic in which its customs, technology, literature, religion, geography, architecture, music, art, etc. would be examined. Teachers could direct students in meaningful research that could be shared with the group. School libraries could be stocked with books devoted to areas to be studied. Films could be rented that provide insight into the area being studied.

SLOW MOTION

The ecological approach that I am posing necessitates a radical change in school organization and procedure. First, the 30 desk classroom must go. Large group and seminar situations would be needed. When students are not involved in presentations or discussions, they could be working on research or skills that need attention. Personalized instruction would become a reality. Teachers who are not engaged in large group instruction could give tutorial attention to individuals. This is where many of the new tools of educational technology could be creatively used. Programed texts, 8 mm film loops, kinescopes, and other teaching machines could assist a teacher in "customizing" a good program for *every* student.

The motto of this movement might be "Slow Down and Learn" or "Slow Down and Enjoy Education." The pace of school days would naturally follow the more thorough and leisurely interdisciplinary studies. Gone would be the fragmented, bell-ridden, subject-matter centered, curriculum. Such a stopgap solution as modular scheduling could be eliminated, and the non-graded school would flourish in a conducive setting. Most important, the Humanities would be the heart of school programs, not the apologetic, makeshift intruder now struggling against the linear, utilitarian, and scientific influences that predominate. The school that I envision would literally be an environment that contrasts with the fouled environments we all inhabit. Schools of this nature would fulfill the "reconstructive" role that John Dewey so ardently worked for a half-century ago.

(*Several future issues of* Media and Methods *will specifically implement large themes, topics, and problems with the tools mentioned above. Quality material in different media and representing various disciplines will be discussed for their value in investigating environments.—F.M.*)